

Mark 11:12-26 “What the Lord Thinks of Mere Religion”**

Main Idea: To see clearly what the Lord thinks of mere religion, look at what He did and said in Mark 11:12-26. The account involves three scenes.

I. We see a fruitless tree (12-14).

- A. It looked good externally.
- B. It lacked internal reality.
- B. It received the judgment of Jesus.

II. We see a fruitless temple (15-19).

- A. It looked good externally.
- B. It lacked internal reality.
- C. It received the judgment of Jesus.
 - 1. Religion that pleases God is built on God's Word.
 - 2. Religion that pleases God takes prayer seriously.
 - 3. Religion that pleases God sees the world as God sees it.
 - 4. Religion that pleases God offends religious people.

III. We see the power of Jesus (20-26).

- A. The fruitless tree died.
- B. The fruitless temple would soon die.
- C. The Lord is building a new temple, His followers.
 - 1. The Lord calls us to be people of faith (20-23).
 - 2. The Lord calls us to be people of prayer (24).
 - 3. The Lord calls us to forgive (25).

Take it to heart: Ask yourself these questions...

- 1. Is there fruit in my life?
- 2. What needs to change today?

Do religious people go to heaven? Now there's a question!

You say, “Define your terms. What do you mean by ‘religious’ people?” Okay. Let me describe the kind of person I have in mind...

The religious person I have in mind goes to a place of worship consistently and devotedly. He prays faithfully in

his home. He believes that God has revealed Himself in the Holy Scriptures, and so he values the Bible and has memorized large sections of it. He urges others to take the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob seriously. He teaches his children the Scriptures and challenges them to live a moral life as God commands. He believes the promise that God made to the patriarchs, that He would one day establish His eternal kingdom, reward His chosen people, and punish those who refused to believe in Him. He fasts regularly. He gives the first portion of his income to the Lord and does so consistently.

That's what I mean by *religious* people. Do those kinds of people go to heaven?

If we took a survey, my hunch is the results would say, "Yes, religious people will go to heaven. Certainly they have a better chance than *irreligious* people, don't they?"

You may be surprised at what you're about to hear this morning. Jesus made contact with a host of people just like those I've described and He expressed severe displeasure with them, and I mean *severe*. They were religious, but they were *lost*.

Who are these people? We meet them in Mark 11. Last week we listened to two wordless sermons that Jesus preached in Mark 11:1-11. He delivered both on the Sunday prior to His crucifixion. The first involved His riding into Jerusalem on a colt of a donkey. That choice of transportation sent a loud and clear message to the throng of Jews heading into Jerusalem for Passover, a message about His identity as the promised King and Messiah. His second wordless sermon occurred after He arrived in Jerusalem. He went directly to the temple, not to Herod's palace, nor to the Roman fortress, but to the *temple*. His destination sent another loud and clear message about His purpose and the people's greatest need. The people wanted deliverance from Rome. He had come to deliver them from their sins. They were thinking of physical needs. He had in mind their spiritual needs. They were preoccupied with the here-and-now. He had eternity in mind.

Mark 11:11 records what happened when Jesus went to the temple, "He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve." That's it? He just looked around and left without saying a word? What was His assessment? He made that very clear the next morning, as we shall see.

Beloved, we who have come to church today are engaged in religious activity and consequently need to take heed to the following. To see clearly what the Lord thinks of mere religion, look at what He did and said on the Monday of His passion week as recorded in Mark 11:12-26. The account involves three scenes.

I. We see a fruitless tree (12-14).

Listen to verse 12, "The next day [that's Monday, the Monday before Jesus' crucifixion] as they were leaving Bethany [that's Jesus and His twelve apostles], Jesus was hungry." That's interesting. Jesus was hungry. That reminds us that God truly became a *man*. And never forget that the pain of the spikes that tore through His ligaments which fastened Him to the cross was real pain to Him. God became a *man*.

I wonder, why didn't Jesus' host family feed Him breakfast? Thousands cheered Him the previous day, but now no one gives Him breakfast?! Perhaps the fact that Jesus is traveling with twelve other men prohibited His host from meeting this need. Jesus didn't live to eat anyway. There were things more important to Him than fine food. Nonetheless, He did get hungry. As Jesus was walking towards Jerusalem that day, something caught His eye...

Verses 13-14—"Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs [figs in Jerusalem leaf out in March or April but do not produce figs till June^[1]]. Then he said to the tree, 'May no one ever eat fruit from you again.' And his disciples heard him say it."

Let's take a close look at this fig tree. Three things stand out...

A. It looked good externally. Mark says it was “a fig tree in leaf,” a nice looking one, too, for it caught Jesus’ eye. However...

B. It lacked internal reality. Jesus “found nothing but leaves,” Mark states.

Yes, it was Passover time. Yes, it wasn’t time for fig trees to produce their figs—that’s five weeks away. But Jesus knew that. He understood it wasn’t the season for figs. Nonetheless, this leafy tree provides a fitting object lesson for His teaching purposes. The Old Testament often uses the fig tree to symbolize Israel (Jer. 8:13; 29:17; Hos. 9:10, 16; Joel 1:7; Mic. 7:1-6). To the Lord, Israel was just like this fig tree, a lot of foliage but no fruit, impressive externals but void of true Spirit-produced vitality and life.

Could the barren fig tree represent American Christianity? Perhaps. Just because we look good in our million dollar church buildings with our state-of-the-art programs, doesn’t mean we are necessarily producing God-pleasing fruit.

As far as the tree goes, it looked good externally, yet lacked internal reality. Consequently...

C. It received the judgment of Jesus. “May no one ever eat fruit from you again,” He said. Why did Jesus speak to a tree? As we’ll see momentarily, it wasn’t for the tree’s sake. Nevertheless, this incident has caused biblical scholars to pull their hair out. It seems to some that Jesus is acting like a spoiled child who doesn’t get his way.^[2]

For instance, T. W. Manson concludes, “It is a tale of miraculous power wasted in the service of ill temper.”^[3] William Barclay comes to this staggering position, “There can be no doubt that this, without exception, is the most difficult story in the gospel narrative. To take it as literal history presents difficulties which are well-nigh insuperable.”^[4] What difficulties? One, why would Jesus curse a fig tree for not having figs if it wasn’t even fig season yet? Two, why instead of cursing the barren tree didn’t Jesus simply do a miracle to make it produce figs? And three, why would Jesus do a destructive miracle for His own benefit when His other miracles are for the benefit of others (for instance, when hungry in the wilderness, He did not turn stones into bread).

These may be legitimate questions, but they reveal a significant oversight. What Jesus did to the fig tree was not for His own benefit, but for the benefit of others. Notice the end of verse 14 again, “And His disciples heard Him say it.” Jesus was teaching His listeners a most important lesson that was not entirely apparent until the next day.

The fact is, *looks can be deceiving*. A tree full of leaves... A person sitting in church... A businessman with a Bible on his desk... An athlete kneeling to pray in the end-zone after scoring a touchdown... They all look good, but that may be as far as it goes. They just *look good*. There’s no reality behind the looks. Yes, *looks can be deceiving*.

In scene one, we see a fruitless tree. We’ll find out what happened to the cursed fig tree, but not until scene three. Sandwiched in between the two fruitless fig tree passages we see a very related scene two...

II. We see a fruitless temple (15-19).

Indeed, don’t miss the connection between the fruitless fig tree and the fruitless temple. Let’s read the account...

Verses 15-19 “On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, ‘Is it not written: ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’” The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching. When evening came, they went out of the city.”

As we saw last time, on Palm Sunday Jesus went directly to the Temple, looked around, and left. Now we learn what His omniscient gaze saw. We learn three things about the temple...

A. It looked good externally. *Impressive* is an understatement. The Temple was a massive complex. If you have a study Bible, I encourage you to notice the map showing a sketch of the Temple area in Jesus' day. It covered more than 30 acres and was surrounded by great walls.^[5] Upon entering the Temple area, you first came to the Court of the Gentiles, followed by the Court of the Women, then the Court of the Israelites, and finally the inmost area known as the Court of the Priests. The incident in Mark 11 took place in the Court of the Gentiles, a walled, marble paved area three football fields long and 250 yards wide.

The Jewish historian, Josephus, says that during Passover in A.D. 65, there were 255,000 lambs offered. If there were ten offerers per Passover lamb, that would mean there were some 2,700,000 people in Jerusalem!^[6]

Herod began building this temple in 20 B.C. and the project wasn't finished until eighty years later! It was fifteen stories high. Yes, the temple looked good externally. However...

B. It lacked internal reality. You say, "What were money-changers doing in the Temple?" Good question. In short, they tried to make worship *convenient*. As you know, God had commanded His people to bring animals without blemish to sacrifice. Sadly, the Jews turned it into a for-profit-business. They actually sold animals in the Temple. At first, that made it convenient for people (who wants to transport a 300 pound animal from his home 75 miles away?). But in time, it turned into a sham (kind of like buying food inside the park at Kings Island!).

Technically, you didn't have to buy your animal at the temple, but at the temple there were animal inspectors who were prone to "flunk" the animals that people brought from home. You guessed what happened. Sheer exploitation. Selling animals became a huge profit-making business for the priests. They could charge whatever price they wanted, and the people had to pay. For instance, I read where a dove cost 25 times as much inside the temple as it did outside,^[7] and also where a single merchant once offered 3,000 sheep for sale in one day!^[8]

That's what Jesus saw that day, a temple that looked good externally but for the most part lacked internal reality. In his classic book, *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis wrote:

"The greatest evil is not now done in those sordid 'dens of crime' that Dickens loved to paint. It is not even done in concentration camps and labor camps. In those we see its final result. But it is conceived and ordered (moved, seconded, carried and minuted) in clean, carpeted and well-lighted offices, by quiet men with white collars and cut fingernails and smooth-shaven cheeks who do not need to raise their voice."

Too often, beloved, we're impressed by outward form. Know this. Externals can be misleading, eternally misleading. It was in the case of the temple. Oh, it looked good externally, no question about it, but it lacked internal reality. Consequently...

C. It received the judgment of Jesus. The Lord entered the temple area and started cleaning house! Don't get the idea that this was a sixty second flipping of one table. Jesus was angry, and He took drastic action to shut down the merchandising that day.^[9]

By the way, the Jews had cheapened worship in another way according to verse 16, "And would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts." Did you realize that the Jews were using the Temple court as a shortcut? They were. If you were traveling from the eastern part of the city to the Mount of Olives, it saved a lot of time (and time is money!) to cut through the temple court.

"God understands. He knows I'm late for my appointment. He knows my heart." He surely does! He knows if our convenience means more to us than the purity of His worship. Just think of it! There was such disrespect for the worship of God that people actually cut through the temple to save time on business deliveries! Jesus put a stop to it!

The Lord didn't leave the interpretation of His actions in doubt that day. Verse 17 begins, "And as He taught them, he said." Jesus used quite a visual aid that day! And why? *To teach the people*. About what? About the folly of their religion, yes, but also about the kind of religion that pleases God. It's marked by four things...

1. *Religion that pleases God is built on God's Word.* "Is it not written?" Jesus announces in verse 17.

Although He is God, Jesus quoted God's Word to authorize His actions. As we'll see, He cited two texts from the Old Testament. That's significant. The kind of religion that pleases God centers, not on human tradition, but on the Word of God.

2. *Religion that pleases God takes prayer seriously.* Listen to Jesus: “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations’ (a quotation of Isaiah 56:7) ‘But you have made it a den of robbers (a quotation of Jeremiah 7:11).”

That's interesting. When I think of the temple I tend to view it as a place for sacrifices, but Jesus called it a house of *prayer*. What does that teach us about God? He desires for us to pray!

Not that sacrifices aren't important, for they are. A sinner cannot approach a holy God apart from a blood sacrifice. That's why thousands and thousands of lambs were killed on the altar in Jerusalem. That's why Jesus Himself as the Lamb of God came and gave His life on the altar of the cross for the cleansing of sinners. That's why you need to believe in Jesus Christ as your Savior.

But know this. Having your sins covered isn't the end, but the beginning! Now you can pray! Now you can call on God with confidence, to adore Him, to confess your need of Him, to ask Him for help, to bring petitions to Him for the good of others. This is what pleases Him, religion that takes prayer seriously.

3. *Religion that pleases God sees the world as God sees it.* Note Jesus' words, “My house will be called a house of prayer *for all nations.*” God never intended for Israel to be a bucket that hoarded all His blessings. Israel was to be a channel through which God would work to bring the nations to Himself. But Israel failed.

The first century temple illustrated this failure. The temple was supposed to be a place where a God-fearing, seeking Gentile could come and find out about the true God. But what had the Jews done? They turned it into a business district. If a Gentile had visited the Temple and had seen what the Jews were doing there in the name of Jehovah, he would have been turned off. Just like Jesus was.

In fact, this cleansing Jesus did occurred in The Court of the Gentiles. This should have been, as Wiersbe puts it, “the one place where the Jews should have been doing serious missionary work.”[110](#)

Just think of it. The court of the Gentiles should have been a place for praying, but (to borrow from Wiersbe again) it was instead “a place for paying.”

It's no different today. What is it that turns off people about religion? At the top of the list, it's the hypocrisy of using God's worship as a money-making scheme. That turns off Jesus, too!

4. *Religion that pleases God offends religious people.* True religion exposes the hollow deception of the false. Verse 18 states, “The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking *for a way to kill him...*”

It takes humility to be told you are wrong and need to change. That's what the proud religious Jewish leaders lacked. They loved their religion. They didn't want to change. Their only recourse, then, was to get rid of the One who was exposing their need to change.

Kent Hughes ask and answers a critical question, in his book *Disciplines of a Godly Man*: “Why do we worship— is it for God or for man? The unspoken but increasingly common assumption of today's Christendom is that worship is primarily for US—to meet our needs. Such worship services are entertainment-focused, and the worshipers are uncommitted spectators who are silently grading the performance...The telltale sign of this kind of thinking is the common post-worship question, What did you think of the service today? The real question ought to be, What did God think of it and of those who worshiped? and What did I give to God?”[111](#)

Be honest. Did you come to church today to get or to give?

Now scene three. We've seen a fruitless tree and a fruitless temple. Next...

III. We see the power of Jesus (20-26).

We see His power in three ways...

A. The fruitless tree died. Verse 20—“In the morning [that’s Tuesday morning], as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots.” In less than 24 hours, the tree had gone from being full of foliage (and no figs) to being parched all the way to the root system. This is a unique miracle for it is the only ‘nature miracle’ of a destructive nature (other than perhaps the killing of the Gadarene swine).^[12]

Peter noticed it, remembered Jesus' words on the previous day, put two and two together, and said this in verse 21—“Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!” Peter was doing more than stating the obvious. He was looking for answers, “Lord, the fig tree is shriveled up just like you predicted, but how and why?”

Here’s why. R. Alan Cole observes, “Like tree, like temple; like temple, like nation; the parallel is exact.”^[13] Don’t miss the connection. In one day, the fruitless tree died. It would take longer, but...

B. The fruitless temple would soon die. In just forty years, in 70 A.D., the Romans would completely demolish not only the temple, but the entire city of Jerusalem .

If the Lord allowed His temple to be destroyed, where would His people worship? Good question! The fact is...

C. The Lord is building a new temple, His followers. Indeed, we read about this new temple (which is still under construction) in the epistles:

1 Corinthians 3:16 “Don’t you know that **you yourselves are God’s temple** and that God’s Spirit lives in you?”

1 Peter 2:4-5 “As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—**you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house** to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”

That’s why the Lord allowed the destruction of the Jewish temple. He’s building a new temple and the building blocks are the people who know Jesus. What does the Lord expect from this new temple? We find out in the response Jesus gave to Peter regarding the fig tree. We have three responsibilities...

1. *The Lord calls us to be people of faith (20-23).* Verses 22-23—“‘Have faith in God,’ Jesus answered. ‘I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him.

Uprooting mountains was a common rabbinic expression to refer to huge problems. We have a similar expression. We say that the Lord “moves mountains,” and by that we have in mind, not literal mountains, but huge obstacles (like financial debt, relational barriers, etc).

The Christian life is a life of faith. We become Christians by believing in Christ, and we live it day by day the same way. This is what the Lord desires from us, not empty religious ritual, but real vibrant faith. “Have faith in God!”

2. *The Lord calls us to be people of prayer (24).* Verse 24—“Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.” Remember, that’s what the first temple was for too, *a house of prayer*. So in this new temple the Lord is building. We are to pray. We are to ask and believe, and if we do so, we shall believe.

Don’t miss this connection. What failed to happen in the first temple is supposed to happen in the new temple. God invites us to pray. He commands us to pray. He has made it possible for us to pray, through the person and work

of His Son.

This should be one of our primary activities when we gather as a church, *to pray*. It's not all that we do but it should be at the top of the priority list (1 Tim. 2:1). We must devote ourselves to "prayer and the ministry of the Word," as the apostles stated in Acts 6.

3. *The Lord calls us to forgive (25)*. Verse 25—"And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.'" If we know Christ we can experience God's forgiveness. If we know Christ, we must *extend* forgiveness to others. It's not optional. Indeed, forgiving is a prerequisite, Jesus says, to being forgiven by God. If I refuse to extend grace and forgive you, I am cutting myself off from God's grace and forgiveness.

Now, what do faith, prayer, and forgiveness have to do with a cursed fig tree? These are the types of fruit Jesus is pleased with and wants to see in our lives. In the new temple, we are to be known for our faith, our praying, and our forgiving.

Take it to heart: Ask yourself these questions...

1. *Is there fruit in my life?* Let this sink in...

The cursed fig tree in Mark 11 represents religious people, originally the religious Jewish leaders but by application *any* religious person who looks good externally but lack internal reality. Specifically, this kind of internal reality... they should exhibit faith, prayer, and forgiveness. Jesus is no more impressed with people who claim to be spiritual yet have no fruit than He was with a fig tree that had a lot of leaves but no figs.

Is there genuine fruit in your life? Are faith, prayer, and forgiveness evident? Some people are all talk and no walk, all profession and no practice. Are you?

2. *What needs to change today?* What steps do you need to take in order to become a person of faith? ...a person who prays? ...and a person who forgives?

****Note:** This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church . It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

[1] Wessel, p. 726.

[2] As Kent Hughes describes it; p. 86.

[3] Quoted in Wessel, p. 726.

[4] Barclay, p. 269.

[5] Barclay, 272

[6] Information taken from Kent Hughes, p. 87.

[7] Barclay, 274

[8] Cole, 253

[\[9\]](#) The cleansing of the temple was the fulfillment of Malachi 3:1-3.

[\[10\]](#) Wiersbe, p. 150.

[\[11\]](#) Kent Hughes, *Disciplines of a Godly Man*, p. 106.

[\[12\]](#) Cole, p. 251.

[\[13\]](#) Cole, *Mark*, pp. 250-1.